



## The role of accreditation in the Spellings' Commission plan

**T**he Commission on Higher Education Gatling gun sprayed every corner of the higher education system. The commission report and the Secretary of Education herself have both fired on the accrediting agencies in the quest to improve the learning outcome.

At her presentation at the National Press Club on September 26, Secretary Spellings called for a November summit of the regional accrediting agencies to address her plan. The regional accreditation directors had already booked time in November for negotiated rule-making hearings associated with the ongoing Higher Education Act reauthorization. That agenda may now be replaced or expanded.

In the last draft of the Commission's Report, recommendations on the topic were many, and some are excerpted here.

*The growing public demand for increased accountability, quality and transparency coupled with the changing structure and globalization of higher education requires a transformation of accreditation.*

*Parents and students have no solid evidence, comparable across institutions, of how much students learn in colleges or whether they learn more at one college than another.*

*Accreditation and federal and state regulations, while designed to assure quality in higher education, can sometimes impede innovation and limit the*

*outside capital investment that is vital for expansion and capacity building.*

*Federal and state policymakers and accrediting organizations should work to eliminate regulatory and accreditation barriers to new models in higher education that will increase supply and drive costs down.*

*Accreditation agencies [should] act in a more timely manner to accredit new institutions and new programs at existing institutions, while focusing on results and quality rather than dictating, for example, process, inputs, and governance, which perpetuates current models and impedes innovation.*

*Accreditation, once primarily a private relationship between an agency and an institution, now has such important public policy implications that accreditors must continue and speed up their efforts towards transparency where this affects public ends.*

### Accountability, new or not?

Most people, commission members included, envision the accrediting agencies as rigid technocrats, armed with clipboards checking off adherence to onerous processes and the mundane details of faculty credentials. The mental picture does not include any meaningful assessment of quality or outcomes. Why not?

Belle Wheelan, president of the Commission on Colleges at the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) says, "We've done an awful job letting people know what we do. We've been looking at outcomes for some time. In 2001, SACS changed its entire program and instituted our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). It's like a Master's or doctoral thesis. You take this course, you take that course. What does it all add up to? Take all of the resources and parts the institution has together and come up with a way to show that all that has something to do with student learning. Part of that is identifying what you expect students to know in the first place."

Steve Crow, Director of the Higher Learning Commission, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) likewise challenges the stereotype. "We have been after student

assessment since 1989. We have programs embedded in our standards. We are focused on it as a means of improving educational quality."

According to both Wheelan and Crow, the fixation with faculty credentialing over student performance is attributable to the conservative element of the full-time faculty itself, not the accreditors. Further, the accreditors eschew the idea that their agencies cause universities to do only what the agency dictates, rather than the right thing.

For example, how should an instructor be determined competent to teach? SACS has a principle that says instructors have to indeed be quali-

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fied. But SACS doesn't specify how an institution must demonstrate the instructor's competence. Steve Crow agrees, "I have less interest in going in and looking over every faculty member's credentials than I do knowing that the institution has an effective way to evaluate whether teaching effectiveness works for the students."

What should a student learn? Dr. Wheelan noted a southern college that evaluated its introductory math course and made its own determinations of what a student should be able to do. They then tested changes in curricula and teaching methods until performance rose to the new standard. The nursing program was next. Wheelan suggests, "Start with one program

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## Capitol Concerns, Robinson

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without us going in and being prescriptive about the outcomes. That's the faculty's responsibility."

### The specter of standardized tests

In her talk, Secretary Spellings claimed that high standards and accountability in our public schools are the pillars of No Child Left Behind. But No Child Left Behind has as many detractors as advocates. Many educators fear that we can get children reading at grade level one year and competent at math another year, but still not turn out well-rounded kids. Meanwhile Ms. Spellings says, "Action One under my plan is to build on this by expanding the effective principles of No Child Left Behind to high schools . . . and hold them accountable for results."

Are colleges next? No College Student Left Behind? The accreditors do not favor a national higher education system. Not even if the accreditors are to be the architects. Asks Wheelan, "Who is going to identify the standards, the outcomes themselves? It's not the accrediting body's responsibility. It's the responsibility of the teaching faculty."

### College shopping

Secretary Spellings also wants a system of comparable data to allow students and parents to shop one school against another, in a consumer-friendly way.

When it takes the form of consumer comparable information, such as accountability is not the same as assessment of educational programs. Yet they may be connected. The accreditors fear that their agencies' activities and results are not going to cut the mustard—if comparability is paramount.

Crow says, "That has the potential to undercut everything we have been doing." He goes on to say, "I don't mind consumer comparability data. But 80 percent of the students go to the school that's closest and what they can afford. They are not out shopping.

They can't shop—they are not that lucky. So we are focusing on the 20 percent—like Secretary Spellings' daughter who have money and have the option to go across the country."

Actually, accrediting bodies are no longer prescriptive or dogmatic. Actually, they seem to be forcing decisions back on the colleges and their faculties. While colleges undoubtedly relish the freedom to decide, they must also bear the responsibility for determining the desired outcomes and whether students are meeting the challenge.

### Standardize what?

Perhaps the schools liked it better the old, easier way. Ralph Wolff, President of the Western Association of Colleges and Schools (WASC), may think so. "Outcome is necessary, but difficult to measure. There is the need for artifacts and evidence, requirements for portfolios, meta evaluation of capstone courses, theses and projects—programs that show a culmination of learning, not just courses taken and passed."

Complexity is involved in developing critical thinking skills and determining relevant subject matter in any academic discipline. Multiply that complexity by thousands of academic programs. And then again by the number of ways one might evaluate success. Now what standardized test comes to mind?

Meanwhile, educational institutions are moving targets. Nearly two-thirds of the jobs created over the next decade will require a college degree—a degree only one-third of Americans now possess. Colleges will be required to accept more and more students.

The historical bricks and mortar model cannot be sustained, so new forms of delivery are required. Crow believes a massive investment in curriculum and a new form of delivery is necessary. He cites the success of experiments by Carol Twigg at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute under grants from the Pew Trust. Twigg's goal is to demonstrate how course redesign and effective use of information technology

can improve student learning and reduce instructional costs. In just this case alone the accrediting bodies will have to be flexible. Standardization will probably play no role.

Meanwhile, chuckles Belle Wheelan, "I say, 'SACS is not a four-letter word.' SACS stands for Students Are Central to Success. If schools focus on students all the time, they will always be ready for accreditation."

The accrediting agencies seem to have their hearts in the right place. How will they tackle accessibility, affordability and accountability at this month's summit? ■

## About Design, Miller

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- **HVAC.** Replacing or supplementing mechanical ventilation with natural ventilation or mixed-mode conditioning can produce 1.3 percent health cost savings, and 3–18 percent productivity gains, yielding an average ROI of at least 120 percent.

Click on <http://cbpd.arc.cmu.edu/ebids/pages/home.aspx> for more information on the Carnegie Mellon studies.

### In summary

Where does this leave assessment of green project values? While the available data and case studies are limited, rising energy costs will continue to make sustainability issues green design fundamental for the foreseeable future.

The economic returns of green design are becoming measurable and justifiable. When the benefits of health, performance, and other qualitative measures are considered, the argument in favor of sustainability and green building design becomes more persuasive.

The big payoff becomes more certain when a systematic approach is taken that integrates green design during planning and design. ■